



War Lake First Nation
Keeyask ATK Monitoring Program



**War Lake First Nation
Keeyask Generation Project
ATK Monitoring Program Report (April 2020 to March 2021)
June 2021**

Background

The Keeyask Generation Project is a 695 MW hydroelectric generating station and associated principal structures, situated 180 km northeast of Thompson and 40 km southwest of Gillam, currently nearing the end of construction. Located on the lower Nelson River at Gull Rapids, the area is of historical, cultural and emotional importance to the Cree First Nations living there. A reservoir will be created upstream of the structures, which includes a powerhouse complex, a spillway, dams, and dykes.

Through a long process of negotiations, War Lake First Nation (War Lake) agreed to form a partnership along with Tataskweyak Cree Nation, York Factory First Nation, Fox Lake Cree Nation (collectively known as the Partner First Nations), and Manitoba Hydro and ratified the *Joint Keeyask Development Agreement* (JKDA) in 2009, which led to the formation of the Keeyask Hydropower Limited Partnership (KHLP).

Regulatory approval to start the construction of the Keeyask Generation Project was provided in July 2014 after the KHLP submitted an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the project. War Lake First Nation and Tataskweyak Cree Nation, operating as Cree Nation Partners (CNP), assessed the project impacts on its own people using its own Overview of Water and Land (OWL) evaluation process, which was based on Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge (ATK) and used the Mother Earth Ecosystem Model. The findings of the OWL process were published in the Cree Nation Partner's *Keeyask Environmental Evaluation Report* (2012), which was developed as a stand-alone report in support of the partnership's EIS submission.

Part of the commitments made in the EIS included the development an Environmental Protection Plan (EPP), developed to help mitigate, monitor, and manage the environmental impacts predicted in the EIS.

War Lake First Nation signed the JKDA believing in the importance of a comprehensive environmental assessment process, including the resulting EIS and EPP, which are intended to give equal respect to ATK and western technical science for assessing and monitoring environmental impacts. Both ATK and technical science studies were conducted to provide a baseline from which to assess project impacts on the physical, aquatic, terrestrial and socio-economic environments, as well as on traditional resource use, heritage resources and community health.

The War Lake First Nation Keeyask ATK Monitoring Program was launched in the summer of 2017. War Lake First Nation's first *ATK Monitoring Program Report (November 2017-April 2019)* was published in May 2019. This second report covers activities undertaken from April 1, 2019 to March 31, 2020. Note that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the planned March 2020 Resource Users Roundtable was cancelled.

Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge

ATK is knowledge that reflects our experience, understanding, wisdom, values, beliefs, norms and priorities governing our relationships with Mother Earth and all her beings, derived and developed through living in our homeland ecosystem since time immemorial. ATK is inextricably linked to our culture and our worldview.

- Page 35, CNP Keeyask Environmental Evaluation Report (2012)

Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge (ATK) was integrated in the Keeyask environmental assessment process and plays an important role in War Lake's monitoring of project impacts. The CNP approach to using ATK to evaluate past hydroelectric development impacts and the predicted impacts resulting from the construction and operation of Keeyask is modeled on the definition of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) which values the knowledge, beliefs, traditions, practices and worldviews of Indigenous communities about the relationship of living beings with one another and their environment. TEK contributes to the survival of Indigenous communities over countless generations by securing livelihoods through the use and preservation of the environment. TEK is also now recognized by western science as being a valuable body of knowledge, experience, and understandings in managing environmental resources and in measuring environmental impacts from human disturbances, including climate change.

Oral traditions are based on knowledge passed on from one generation to the next. This oral history captures the knowledge and experience gained in one's lifetime – together they provide the foundation for ATK. Research and monitoring requires spoken word opportunities for collecting and recording information, which can include discussion forums, interviews and mapping including Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Mapping (TLUOM). Relying on individual and group interviews and mapping to show the extent and type of land use, information recorded on maps include hunting, trapping, fishing, plant and timber harvesting activity, camp and cabin sites, landscape markers, sacred sites and travel routes. However, ATK is proprietary and sensitive, belonging exclusively to each Indigenous community. The content recorded is protected and only shared with the consent of the knowledge keepers and the community.

ATK collected can go beyond recording only land use and occupancy. Past and present experiences and observations on language, traditions, values and the balance of spiritual, physical, mental and emotional dimensions are often recorded with Oral History and Oral Tradition interviews and through group discussions. Values include recognizing the spiritual and its interconnectedness with the physical, acknowledging reciprocity or the *"belief that as we receive from others, we must also offer to others"*, and understanding the concept of all things being equal as in *"we are part of the natural world with no separation between living and non-living"*.

Indigenous thought... is holistic, circular and relational. "Indigenous peoples have traditionally seen all life on the planet as so multi-dimensionally entwined that they have not been quick to distinguish the living from the non-living"... all things on the earth: plants, animals, earth, water, air and other humans.

*Page 10 – 2004 Aboriginal Research: Berry Picking and Hunting in the 21st Century by
Kathy Absolon and Cam Willett*

ATK is continuously maintained by Indigenous communities and groups in response to their environment and their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity. Ensuring that knowledge and experiences passed down from one generation to the next, including collective worldview, values, customs and ways of doing and thinking, is integral to the preservation of ATK.

Cree Nation Partners Environmental Evaluation

The OWL evaluation process, based on TEK principles, guided compensations and partnership negotiations between War Lake and Manitoba Hydro. Both the War Lake 2002 *OWL Process Keeyask Project Draft Report* and the 2002 *Overview of Water and Land (OWL) Summary Report* acknowledged that the OWL process was guided by the Cree worldview. Further OWL studies followed using reference groups to examine the predicted environmental effects of Keeyask, focusing on the relationship of CNP Members to their environment. This comprehensive study process involved meetings, interviews, survey and community engagement, and resulted in War Lake's *Adverse Effects Agreement* and the JKDA.

The CNP 2012 *Keeyask Environmental Evaluation Report* was attached to the Keeyask EIS along with similar environmental evaluations conducted by York Factory First Nation and Fox Lake Cree Nation. The provisions for ATK environmental monitoring under the Environmental Protection Plan allowed for each of the Partner First Nations to develop their own approach to monitoring the effects of the project on their communities and environment through independent Traditional Knowledge Monitoring Programs.

The EIS also included findings from community fieldwork studies conducted by War Lake Members and completed in 2009-2010. The local fieldwork team conducted Key Person Interviews (KPIs) with Members, collected and reviewed community and historical documents, and described an environmental baseline that provided a point of comparison for reporting on environmental monitoring activities conducted in 2017-2019 under the War Lake ATK Monitoring Program. Where significant, the 2009-2010 findings are included in this report.

Keeyask Environmental Protection Plan

The EEP was developed during the Keeyask environmental assessment process to mitigate, manage and monitor predicted adverse effects during Keeyask construction and operation. During the process, a baseline of conditions was established and described in the Keeyask EIS. The War Lake ATK Monitoring Program outlines the fieldwork research necessary to help compare past fieldwork results that helped define a baseline with current findings to determine the following:

- Test predicted effects outlined in the EIS;
- Identify unanticipated effects of the Project;
- Monitor the effectiveness of mitigation measures; and
- Determine if adaptive management is required.

War Lake ATK Monitoring Program

The War Lake ATK Monitoring Program was designed to provide opportunities for War Lake Members, including Elders, resource users, knowledge holders and youth to record, discuss, and communicate observations and perspectives regarding the effects of Keeyask construction and operation on all aspects of their world. This fieldwork research is conducted with the support and guidance of local fieldwork staff and advisors.

The program is guided by the following community objectives:

- Incorporate ATK in Keeyask monitoring and reporting processes;
- Ensure ATK is given equal weight to western science;
- Provide employment and training opportunities for War Lake Members;
- Provide opportunities for War Lake Members to participate in “on the land” activities;
- Facilitate the transfer of valuable knowledge held by Elders to our youth;
- Facilitate information sharing between Partner First Nations and Manitoba Hydro; and
- Ensure War Lake Members are kept well-informed of all program activities and results.

Two key components drive the Program. Monitoring through “on-the-land” observations and through roundtable discussions with experienced resource users. Members, Elders, knowledge holders and youth get together “on the land” to observe and discuss changes to the land and waterways. Each season, a monitoring trip is planned to spend 3-5 days at a site traditionally used for hunting, trapping and fishing. The second component is Resource Users Roundtables. The resource users’ discussion forum provides opportunities for Members to share their experience and knowledge of being on the land to trap, hunt and fish. Discussions are held each season to share knowledge and changes observed in areas that extend from the Landing (Aiken) River to Three Sisters Lake to Fox River. This report will discuss the observations made on three ATK Monitoring Trips and over four Resource User Roundtables.

Objectives

War Lake developed its own traditional knowledge-based environmental monitoring program to:

- Identify areas and sites of importance;
- Document observations and traditional knowledge;
- Create a baseline of current conditions;
- Monitor changes to the environment;
- Explore the causes of environmental change; and
- Establish a record for future generations.

Community Engagement

Community support and involvement are essential for successfully applying traditional knowledge to any research, assessment or monitoring project. War Lake Members established a collaborative approach that respects Cree cultural values using community-based direction and participation to design the War Lake ATK Monitoring Program.

To ensure the effectiveness of the monitoring process, informed consent was obtained from all participants based on the provision of clear information on the objectives of each program event and the following assurances:

- All information collected was owned and controlled by War Lake First Nation;
- All sensitive information would be fully protected; and
- Confidentiality of individual contributions would be fully respected.

The information provided through GPS and mapping activities is considered highly sensitive and will only be shared with parties under the strict direction and approval of War Lake First Nation. Similarly, the rich detail of events and activities identifying War Lake family members will be kept private and preserved for the community as part of their historical legacy. Signed consent and confidentiality forms are kept off-site for security and privacy.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic restricted War Lake from undertaking the full range of activities planned for the ATK Monitoring Program in 2020 and into 2021. As public health guidelines shifted and War Lake took all necessary measures to ensure that COVID-19 was kept out of the community, it was difficult to organize the activities as planned. The ATK Monitoring Program requires in-person interaction to conduct both the ATK Monitoring Trips and Resource User Roundtables described above.

The pandemic also restricted, at times, War Lake Members from undertaking traditional activities with family members and close friends, as in-person interactions were greatly restricted. Unfortunately, this has lessened the number of “on-the-land” observations War Lake can report this year.

Caribou Monitoring

War Lake continued to conduct caribou monitoring in the War Lake Traditional Use Area. Using GPS and snowmobiles, two War Lake Members noted the locations of caribou spotted, both in small and large numbers. When possible, the species and sex of the caribou are noted.

Information gleaned from War Lake’s caribou monitoring was shared with the Keeyask Caribou Coordination Committee to help ensure the protection of these important species.

Resource Users Roundtables

War Lake explored the possibility of holding Resource User Roundtables, both in-person and via teleconference, but because they rely on in-person information sharing, with up to 10 Resource Users

participating at once, it was deemed unsafe to attempt to organize these events. War Lake will resume these important events when it is considered safe to do so.

ATK Monitoring Trips

War Lake managed to conduct one ATK Monitoring Trip to the highly valued location of Fox River in September 2020. At the time, travel restrictions to the north were lifted and an advisor was able to join War Lake Members from September 17th to 23rd.

For this trip, the primary focus of investigations was related to fishing and moose hunting characteristics, including general field observations of health and size. The Monitoring Trip also provided an opportunity for War Lake youth to participate in important land- and water-based social and cultural activities with experienced resource users and knowledge holders.

For further information on the experience at the Fox River Camp and the observations recorded related to the physical environment, please see the Trip Report attached as Appendix A to this report.

In previous reports, War Lake has provided a comparison of various observations to previous years, including in relation to the physical environment, hunting, fishing, trapping, and related areas of observation. Due to the lack of activity and engagement when compared to previous years, War Lake has decided to resume its full ATK Monitoring Program before providing further comparisons.



War Lake First Nation
Keeyask ATK Monitoring Program

APPENDIX 1

ATK Monitoring Trip #6

Summary Report

**Destination: Fox River Outfitters Camp
at the Confluence of Bigstone River and Fox River**

September 2020

OVERVIEW

War Lake conducted an Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge (ATK) Monitoring Trip from September 17th to the 23rd, 2020. The original start date was September 16, but was postponed to the 17th due to poor flying conditions. War Lake Members, including knowledge holders, resource users, and youth, traveled with an advisor from War Lake First Nation to Fox River Outfitters Camp (herein referred to as Fox River Camp) to conduct traditional activities, while monitoring an important part of the War Lake Traditional Use Area (WLTUA). The intention of the program is to review environmental effects on the WLTUA resulting from the construction of the Keeyask Generating Station.

For this trip, the primary focus of investigations was related to fishing and moose hunting characteristics, including general field observations of health and size. The Monitoring Trip also provided an opportunity for War Lake youth to participate in important land- and water-based social and cultural activities with experienced resource users and knowledge holders. With continued Monitoring Trips to highly valued locations, War Lake aims to document any observable environmental changes, with a focus on those which may affect resource use, including issues related to access, respectful hunting practices, and the health and availability of local wildlife. As well, the knowledge imparted by Members and documented in this report also includes stories and insight from other parts of the WLTUA, including related topics such as other foods, environmental observations, and important personal and family connections to the lands and waters.

This report will describe the activities undertaken leading up to the trip and while hunting and fishing and will provide observations and insights made by War Lake Members.

The following Members participated on the Monitoring Trip:

- Edward Ouskun – Knowledge Holder
- Brenda Ouskun – Knowledge Holder
- Dano Fitzner – Knowledge Holder
- Joe Ouskun – youth
- Ethan Laliberty – youth
- Chris Fitzner – youth
- Mattius Spence – youth.

CONSENT AND CONFIDENTIALITY

War Lake's advisor reviewed and discussed the Consent and Confidentiality Form to ensure War Lake Members were aware of how the information they provide will be used and protected. All participants agreed to sign the Consent and Confidentiality Form. All youth consent forms were reviewed and signed by Brenda Ouskun, participating Knowledge Holder.

DAY #1 — TRAVEL TO CAMP. FISHING, AND TRACKING

On the morning of September 17, 2020, advisor Ariel Lupu, accompanied by his son, Nathan Lupu, flew out of Thompson around 7:15 am and into War Lake at about 8:00 am to pick up the participating Members, and then off to the Fox River Camp, arriving about 8:30 am. Final preparations and loading of gear and provisions were made in War Lake before departing for the Fox River Camp, including gathering and loading:

- General supplies including, groceries, fishing equipment, sleeping bags, and other related supplies.
- Gasoline and propane.

The group arrived at the camp and was greeted by Randy Naismith and his brother-in-law, Lyle McMaster, who provided additional support and guidance for the land and water activities. After unloading and settling in, three (3) separate boats explored different sections of the Bigstone River and Fox River. The main focus was to call and scout for moose signs, while establishing fishing locations for both angling and setting nets.



Photo 1 - Unloading Otter Aircraft at Fox River Camp Landing

Day #1 Observations

- The current was quite strong, moving the boat downstream at considerable speed, but not strong enough to sweep a human away with basic swimming skills (also observed on Days 2 to 5).
- The clear waters of the Bigstone and Fox Rivers are quite shallow in certain locations, with rapids, and many boulders just below the surface edges (also observed on Days 2 to 5).
- Macrophyte vegetation was scattered, with many areas appearing scoured from current and high flows (also observed on Days 2 to 5).
- In some locations it was difficult to listen for moose, due to the high flows in various side streams, which are attributed to beaver *Castor canadensis*) activity.
- Fishing (observations in only one (1) of three (3) boats):
 - Three (3) walleye [otherwise known as pickerel] (*Sander vitreus*), and two (2) Northern pike [otherwise known as Jackfish] (*Esox lucius*) were caught angling in the Bigstone River, with Edward Ouskun guiding and positioning the boat within the current,
 - The pickerel were a brownish-yellow colour, well proportioned, with no observed lesions or external parasites, and were generally about 43 cm (17 in) in length, and
 - The Jackfish were quite skinny in girth, and about 64 cm (about 25 in) in length.
 - Note: all reported lengths throughout this report are total from tip of the jaw to end of the tail (not fork length).
- Shorelines along the river:
 - Were mostly composed of silty-clay, with various wetland grasses, sedges, and extensive moose browse vegetation such as willow (*Salix sp.*) in the shallow nearshore areas, and
 - Backshore areas contained mostly coniferous forest characteristic of the High Boreal/Hudson Bay Lowland areas of Manitoba, and were comprised mostly of Black spruce (*Picea mariana*) and Tamarack (*Larix laricina*), with less than five (5) percent deciduous trees containing poplar (*Populus spp.*) and Paper birch (*Betula papyrifera*).
- The Black bear (*Ursus americanus*) known to wander into the camp area was spotted on the shoreline, below the main cabin.
- Marten (*Martes americana*) boxes were observed on trees along the river edges (also observed on Days 2 to 5).

- A pair of Canada jays [also known as Whiskey jacks] (*Perisoreus canadensis*) hung around camp, especially with moose remains as a major food source (also observed on Days 2 to 5).



Photo 2 - Sunset at Fox River Camp

DAY #2 — HUNTING AND FISHING

The first moose kill occurred at about 7:00 am, approximately 250 m (273 yards), southwest of the Fox River Camp, in the nearshore area. The large bull moose was brought to the camp by boat, and then hauled onto the camp landing by the youth. The antlers of the moose had 8-points on each side of the rack. The bull was quartered and all meat was taken out and hung. As well, prized organ meat such as the kidney and liver were removed. As mentioned by the hunters, the meat is to be shared amongst family and other War Lake Members.

The second moose kill occurred down river of the Fox River Camp, along a thick willow nearshore area. Three (3) boats filled with all hunting party members and advisor assisted in preparing and hauling the meat back to the Fox River Camp. The moose was actually killed by Chris in the late afternoon-early evening of Day #1.

This was Chris' first moose kill and was celebrated with tobacco offerings from both him and his father, Dano. As a show of respect, the moose hide and other left-overs were gathered and neatly piled in one (1) location. Leaving parts of animals strewn around a kill site is considered disrespectful to the animal.



Photo 3 – Youth hauling bull moose ashore at Fox River Camp landing.

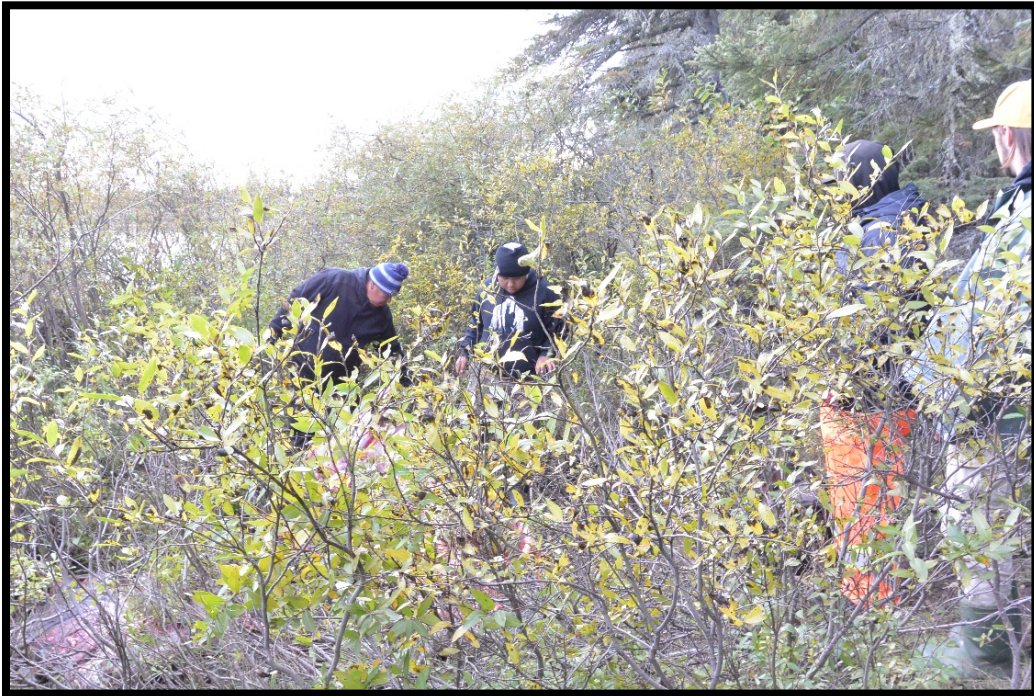


Photo 4 – Chris and Dano preparing the moose kill amongst the willows along the Fox River



Photo 5 – Brenda Ouskin, Chris' proud mom

The groups undertook two (2) separate fishing sessions, with focus again being on moose calls and tracking.

Day #2 Observations

- Wolves (*Canus lupus*) were heard howling upstream of the camp, which indicated that moose may have scattered in that area to avoid predation.
- There were lots of game trails in the area of the second moose kill.
- A few pickerel and Jackfish were caught, with most being in the 40 cm (16 in) length range.
- At least three (3) beavers were observed working the shoreline by gathering timber and readying the dens for winter (also observed on Days 3 to 5).
- There were many game trails along both shorelines.
- One (1) Lake sturgeon (*Acipenser fulvescens*) was caught in the Fox River with a net and brought back to camp to be processed (after departure of advisors). The sturgeon weighed about 34 kg (75 lbs), and was about 1.2 m (4 ft) in length.

DAY #3 – TRACKING AND FISHING

The weather turned from fall-like weather with cool overnights, to summer weather with gusty winds, reaching a high of about 20°C. With the higher temperatures, came blackflies and mosquitoes, which were not as abundant the first two (2) days of the Monitoring Trip. As such, two (2) separate boat trips were undertaken during the day, with the first taking place in the morning, and the second during the evening.



Photo 6 – Moose tracking along Bigstone River shoreline

The first trip combined tracking and exploring shoreline areas for game trails and other moose signs.

Day #3 Observations

- The first site explored along the Bigstone River had lots of relatively fresh moose signs with game trails and tracks in the nearshore area.
- Vegetation in the area was comprised mostly of lichen-moss, with scattered Labrador tea (*Ledum groenlandicum*) and other shrubs, such as willows (*Salix sp.*) and alder (*Alnus sp.*) along the riparian-water's edge.



Photo 7 – Moose trail (approximate centre of photo)

- The second trip explored the Fox River, which also had lots of relatively fresh moose trails and tracks.
- Fishing downstream of Moose Island in the deeper areas of the Fox River produced 13 pickerel, with the largest two (2) being around 52 cm (20.5 in) in length. Most other pickerel were around 43 cm (17 in) in length.
- One (1) butterfly, and what appears to be an Eastern Comma butterfly (*Polygonia comma*) was observed sunning on the main cabin. This butterfly is considered uncommon in Manitoba (source: <https://www.inaturalist.org/guides/5572?tags%5B%5D=Manitoba+Conservation+Status+Rank%3DS3+--+Uncommon>)
 - War Lake is seeking confirmation of the butterfly species.



Photo 8 – Moose track (centre of photo)



Photo 9 – Edward with 52 cm (20.5 in) pickerel



Photo 10 – Curing moose meat



Photo 11 – Preparing supper with fried moose meat and onions



Photo 12 – Butterfly sunning on main cabin

DAY #4 — TRACKING, AND FISHING

The daytime high reached about 23°C, but in front of the main cabin in the direct sun, it seemed more like 30°C. It was too warm for hunting, but tracking and fishing continued later in the day.

Day #4 Observations

- There was a thin haze in the sky from brush fires in the western US.
- Fishing was slow, with only a few pickerel and small Jackfish being caught.



Photo 13 – Hazy skies from western US brush fires

DAY #5 – TRACKING, FISHING, AND DEPARTURE OF ADVISOR

Rain started overnight, with intermittent showers throughout the day. Again, the temperature was cooler, but still warm at about 16°C. Most activities during the day occurred in the morning, and focused on tracking with only five (5) pickerel caught on the Fox River. Ariel and Nathan were picked by float plane and transported back to Thompson, around 5:00 pm.



Photo 14 – Hazy morning, with mist over the water

STORIES AND INSIGHT

1. Locations

Atkinson (otherwise known as Fox) Lake is another important hunting and fishing area for War Lake Members. Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) herds are known to traverse the area, and many have been seen crossing the lake while ice fishing. Caribou sightings in War Lake First Nation have been common in recent years.

Edward explained that travel in this back-country can be difficult without airplanes and winter roads. He mentioned that his uncle once carried a freighter canoe from Atkinson Lake up to Big Kettle Lake, that took a lot of strength and was challenging due to the numerous portages. Spring run-off and high water made the trip home to War Lake even more challenging.

2. Fishing

In March 2019, sauger (*Sander canadensis*) was caught for the first time in Atkinson Lake. The sauger was caught in a net through the ice, with the largest one being about 43 cm (17 in) in length. All fish caught during that trip, including walleye and sauger, were shared with family and community.

Whitefish (*Coregonus clupeaformis*) in Atkinson Lake are caught, dried, and smoked using diamond willow as the preferred woody material. The brine ingredients used to prepare the fish for smoking include water, kosher salt, and paprika.

3. Hunting

Cows without calves are called “Dry Cows,” and are fair game if observed to be solitary over a few days of tracking.

4. Meat Preparation

When consuming moose meat, the liver and kidneys are best when fried. Bear meat is also good when fried. Bear meat in this area is lean, because they hunt young moose calves, with evidence observed on the traplines. In addition, younger bulls have more tender meat.

5. Other Foods

Edward remembered picking blueberries and strawberries in the 1960s with the family. The rail line area was a good source before they started spraying chemicals. Both

Edward and Brenda have indicated that the smaller leaves of Labrador tea, are preferred for preparing teas.

6. Trapping

Edward and his brother helped built a cabin at Cyril Lake in 1986, which was used for trapping and recreation. Ed's brother shot beavers for their fur along the Dafoe River.

Edward accompanied his uncle on a few occasions as a trapper's helper. When Edward was 14 years old, he started accompanying his father on the trapline for the next eight (8) years. With a current decline in trapping, there is a higher beaver population. As well, increase in the Marten populations in the area was first observed in the 1980s, which as a consequence, facilitated a decline in the Fisher (*Pekania pennanti*) population.